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ABSTRACT

A writing instructor has grappled with how both to integrate and to complicate critical perspectives on technology in the writing classroom. In collaboration with another instructor, a computer classroom pedagogy was constructed emphasizing imperatives of cultural studies practice as outlined by James Berlin. The pedagogy is similar to Berlin's emphasis in its relationship to media and technological issues addressing both public and private space. The instructors assign the class to read and review a map concerning world-wide web connection regulations and to be prepared to discuss the map in relationship to cultural issues. These discussions prompted a student complaint that "technology did complicate our lives and that it was making us all lazy thinkers." The class focused intently on how technologies relate to cultural issues. Instructors realized that a personal engagement with the students was necessary in order to draw out their experiences with technology. Critiquing teachers' and students' narratives and metaphors of technology is a beginning point in a fluid, non-neutral process of engaging students in an effort to deconstruct oppressive power relations. Multiple mappings, shifting meanings, institutional pressures and ever-present risks are all parts of the electronic writing classroom. Contains 23 references. (SC)

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Countering Deterministic Tools: A Critical Theory Approach to Computers & Composition

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While conversations in composition often interrogate the co-construction of meanings, developments of literacies, and complex subjectivities of both students and teachers, these inquiries only recently have begun to contend with complications of incorporating electronic writing such as e-mail, listservs, MOOs, MUDs, chatrooms, and hypertexts. As Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe's (1991) now often quoted work, "The Rhetoric of Technology and the Electronic Writing Class," explains, early conversations attending to the integration of these forms of electronic writing in the composition classroom seemed overwhelmingly to endorse them. Because this enthusiasm often lacked an acknowledgement to the potential complications of these technologies' integrations into our writing pedagogies, Hawisher and Selfe suggest that this adulation must be balanced with more situated critiques of technology and its deployment in our classrooms (p. 64). Also, in Selfe's keynote address at last year's Cs, she urged us to continue critical explorations of technology.

Based in concerns similar to Hawisher and Selfe's and Selfe's, many computer and composition scholars have worked to re-envision electronic writing classrooms through critical approaches to technology. Through a wide range of scholarship on electronic writing conducted by such researchers as Nancy Kaplan, Joseph Janangelo, Lester Faigley, Alison Regan, Susan Romano, Pam Takayoshi, Cynthia Selfe and Dickie Selfe, Stuart Selber, and Johndan Johnson-Eilola, computer compositionists have sought to make connections among theirs and their students' assumptions about technologies and the personal, social, cultural, political, institutional, ideological, material, corporeal, and architectural spaces of their electronic classrooms.

While these contributions do not represent a unified conception of technology, all of these scholars do participate in a continued critical dialogue on technology. In my presentation, here, I want to add to this on-going dialogue by exploring my own interactions in the electronic writing classroom. This exploration is prompted by my own grappling with how both to integrate and to complicate critical perspectives on technology in the writing classroom. As many computer and composition scholars suggest, such contextualized views must emerge not only from our pedagogical and theoretical discussions but also from the situated historicizing of the technology by writing instructors and their students. Therefore, I will use my electronic writing classroom experiences not as the standard for all computer classrooms but rather as a beginning site in my own articulation of these challenges.

To make clear my pedagogical goals in relationship to the classroom discussion to which I will be referring, I want to acknowledge my indebtedness to cultural studies and/or computers and composition scholars who attend to the complexities of the classroom (See those listed in the literature review as well as James Berlin 1991, 1992; Patricia Harkin 1991; bell hooks 1989, 1994; Henry Giroux 1991; Giroux and Peter McLaren 1992; Johndan Johnson-Eilola 1996; Ira Shor 1987). These scholars attend to issues of pedagogy in differing classroom spaces—either the traditional

classroom or the electronic classroom; but despite the difference in location, all provide rationales for engaging students in critical inquiry. This point also is not to suggest that they represent a unified conception of those processes. Instead, I assert that each attends to the politics of the classroom in ways that speak to my own pedagogical goals. Also, I want to stress that my pedagogical conceptions are informed by other scholars, former-teaching experiences across three different institutions, pedagogical discussions with colleagues, and my own student experiences, all of which cannot be separated from the exploration I will be providing.

During the fall semester in 1997, a colleague and I collaborated to construct a computer classroom pedagogy. This pedagogy emphasized imperatives of cultural studies practice as outlined by James Berlin (1996). He states that "cultural studies pedagogues want students to begin to understand that language is never innocent, that it instead constitutes a terrain for ideological battle....We are thus committed to teaching, reading, and writing as an inescapably political acts, the working out of contested cultural codes affecting every feature of experience" (p.131). Such goals, as he further explains, "involve teachers in an effort to problematize both students' and teachers' experiences (p. 131). Berlin's emphasis on the critique of cultural codes is similar to the methodology of our own computer composition pedagogy. That is, we situated our pedagogy in relationship to media and technological issues addressing both public and private space.

An integral component of our collaborative course development was our agreement to meet after both of us had taught to discuss the ways in which we felt the day's activities met or failed to meet our daily goals as well as our course goals. We enacted, however, different means for classroom discussion and interaction with students because of our differing teaching styles, our conceptions of our classes' personalities, and the architectures of our computer classrooms. But, we felt sharing our classroom experiences with the co-constructed pedagogy would be a means to increase our self-reflection and critical awareness to our and our students' benefits.

During this particular semester, the pace of the course, unfortunately, was complicated by technical problems with campus career and email accounts. Of the twenty students, only four articulated a high level of comfort in relationship to the course technologies. And, while none expressed fear, after the first week, I still had two students who had not yet been able to subscribe to the course listserv because of email problems. On the day we began our first in-class discussion (that Wednesday of the second week), I asked the students to move to the front of the classroom for face-to-face contact to avoid the screen stares and to help familiarize further faces and names. Their assignment had been to read and review a map concerning world-wide web connection regulations and be prepared to discuss the map in relationship to cultural issues as outlined in the introduction to the course.

This map displays color codes for different access regulations and then codes the countries accordingly. My students and I discussed these codes as well as how the tone of the article positioned web access as equivalent to personal and political freedom. The discussion, then, turned to how the U.S. and other more economically viable countries where supposedly setting the standard for lesser economically viable *regions* such as Latin America and Africa. In reading the cues concerning the idealism of technology and the role of the United States in establishing electronic global freedom, my students quickly moved to how such narratives define **us** as a nation—sophisticated technologically and economically, positioned as welcome members in the emerging global economy, and world leaders in personal freedoms. As I attempted to shift the conversation from the **literally** global discussion and connect it to their own **localized** experiences, many of the

students continued to champion the "freedom" of access issues put forth by the map. That is, while they read the codes and even noted the cultural hegemony of these narratives, they saw **no** discrepancy in the claim of the "technology as freedom story" with their own relationships to technology. When I probed further, asking them to consider how our first week of class proceeded in relationship to the technology we had access to, a few students explained that the problems were, indeed, frustrating but these "glitches" did not challenge them to re-figure the technology's role in more complex ways. Soon, a student began complaining that technology **did** complicate our lives and that it was making us all lazy thinkers. After this comment, the discussion heated to "debate" between several students on the pros and cons of computer technology.

To redirect the discussion, or attempt to do so, I asked students to come back to issues of access not from an either/or position but rather to consider how access is more subtly defined. How, for example, might issues of access relate not merely "to the freedom to connect" as emphasized in the article but also to issues of class, race, gender, sexuality, and age? How is computer literacy discussed in relationship to education, professionalization, and entertainment? Initially, these questions turned the discussion in more productive directions, but these overly general questions also led to the voicing of "how girls just aren't good at computers" and "how race made no difference in relationship to computer technology—after all, on-line no one can tell what race you are." Ultimately, the conversation ended with one student's pronouncement that "none of this *really* mattered—after all, the web isn't *real*!" I, then, asked the student to explain further. His assumption was that technology is important to task completion, but that it did not *affect* us nor was it really *effected* by us.

The class ended. I asked students to come back on Friday ready to discuss further how computer technologies relate to cultural issues and how the real/virtual split could be considered. While walking back to my office, I could feel the lack of *connection* I had made with my students. Why? What **hadn't** I done? I **had not** asked them to position themselves in relationship to the computer technologies in the classroom. Instead, I had begun the course by busying them in setting up the "tool" for our classroom use. I had learned all of their names by the second day. I had circulated to help with the changing of passwords and setting up email accounts, but I **had not** asked them to tell their own stories about computers and technology. I **had not** asked them to map themselves in relationship to the technology. I **had not** even asked them to discuss such topics in groups prior to our whole class discussion. The metaphors and narratives of computer technology, therefore, remained intact—including the metaphor of computers as an all good or all bad tool; the belief that computers are a **real** reflection of our current conditions or that they are an un-real representation or fantasy of our world; and finally, the narrative of technology as either the spirit of economic progress or the downfall of a too greedy nation. All of these ideas went unchallenged for all of us.

For all the ways in which I had espoused contextualization and claimed the need to challenge deterministic metaphors and narratives of technology, I had done neither. Further, while the discussion did not reach proportions of misogyny or racism as articulated by some of the computer composition instructors' works noted, the discussion was dominated by my male students who seemed to want to argue with me or other female students who tried to contribute to the discussion. Since I **had not** foregrounded the terms by which we should discuss issues, I lacked any plan for how to attend to the potential risks to students. I do not claim that the assignment is inherently flawed, but my approach to it was. In our reflection on our classroom discussions that day, my colleague and I both agreed that the lack of contextualization of this map affirmed our need to engage ***with*** our students and not ***at*** them.

My reading of my classroom and the concerns this interpretation raises are not necessarily the "correct" ones. Rather, even now, I realize the ways in which my students are categorized almost collectively (I provide no individual voices, no names, and little notation concerning the students' or my race, gender, class background, sexuality, and age). This act and my read of the situation are linked by my concern not to present the loudest student, the most dramatic story, or even the "best" read of a specific race, class, or gender issue but instead, I wanted to present the less obvious instantiations of normalizing classroom behaviors by me and them.

To begin to contextualize the ways in which computer technology is constructed in our composition classrooms, we must consider the narratives and metaphors that normalize teacher and student interpretations of it. To rethink technology, we must re-think our conceptions and languaging about how technology functions. This revision process, however, must be situated in relationship to students' and teacher's narratives and metaphors of technology. That is, in the electronic classroom, we must attend to the very real ways our interactions with technology are mediated through such stories and examples of how technology is *supposed* to function.

Such articulations and re-articulations are highlighted in Johndan Johnson-Eilola's (1996) book, *Nostalgic Angels: Re-articulating Hypertext Writing.* This text offers me a way to re-envision my own classroom experiences in relationship to technology. In his work, Johnson-Eilola explains his objective to be the building of a critical practice of hypertext that situates this technology in relation to social, economic, and political environments. To this end, he asserts his interest as working through the issues of conceptualizing and roughly categorizing current hypertext theory and practice from a social/technological standpoint and of then constructing a critique of hypertext that complicates his categorical scheme, all in order to enact a critical practice of hypertext (p. 25). This contextualization of hypertext is a direct challenge to the normalization of this technology as an inherently liberatory or inherently functional tool. Articulating the contested visions and normalized positions of this technology, ultimately, can open up the possibility for a re-articulation of hypertext that can be used to challenge our hegemonic institutional structures and literate practices. Based upon his work, we can begin not only to question the role of hypertext in the electronic writing classroom but also the role of other technologies as well. For example, how might articulation theory have aided in my classroom conversation? How might the computer as a dystopic or utopic tool be challenged by such a theory, and how might this theory be enacted in the classroom?

By beginning with my students' conceptions of computer technology, I could have started a conversation that did not seem like a corrective to their experiences. In other words, asking my students to map—discursively and visually—how computer technology relates to their daily lives and experiences, and then asking them to discuss those figures in small groups could have been a better starting point. Rather than beginning with someone else's map, I could have contextualized the situation by offering a method which focuses on their own maps, and by *then*, asking students to compare their maps with the one assigned. Through this strategy, collectively as a class, we could have begun to inquire critically into the co-existence of the metaphors of computers as either good or bad tools or the narratives of technology as either freedom or damnation.

To further the process of articulation, I also could have drawn on the theoretical frameworks of technological theorists such as Andrew Feenberg and Jennifer Terry and Melodie Calvert. For Andrew Feenberg, technology is not a thing in the ordinary sense of the term, but an 'ambivalent'

process of development suspended between different positionalities. In this view, technology is not a destiny but a scene of struggle (p. 14). Similarly, Terry and Calvert define technology as "always encompassing relationships and exchanges among machines, designers, and users . . . . This approach assumes that technology carries with it human moral responsibility, and argues that one simply cannot understand technology outside its particular historical, economic, and cultural context of design and use" (p.3). For these theorists and others highlighted throughout this presentation, technology is not outside of historical or material contexts—it has affects on and is effected by culture. Technology is not a static entity wielding its power over us. To engage my own students in a more historicized process and fluid definition of technology, I could have easily asked them to find histories concerning the design and development of a certain manifestation of computer technology. That is, asking students to find stories of the development and user testing of computer technologies can serve as a means to bring critical awareness to the historical and material situatedness of computer technologies.

Through an articulation of their own stories as well as the historical and cultural context of computer technologies, I could have, then, engaged my students in discussions concerning the interrelationships of cultural issues to these multiple texts—rather than the single map. Thus, providing opportunities for more complex articulations also would allow for more complex re-articulations of the narratives and metaphors of computer technologies.

The practice of articulation as a means to critique my own and my students' narratives and metaphors of technology is not an ending point in a more critical inquiry of technology. Rather, I believe such efforts to be a beginning point in a fluid, non-neutral process of engaging students in an effort to deconstruct oppressive power relations. Such work, however, also must pursue constructive aims and negotiations to ensure at least the possibility for momentary equitability.

In the closing of one of her articulation projects, Donna Haraway (1992) explains that articulation asserts that "this story, its core figure and its narrator, will not let us dodge the scary issues of race/racism, gender/sexism, historical tragedy, and technoscience with the region of time we politely call 'the late twentieth century.' There is no safe place here; there are, however, many maps of possibility" (p. 326). Indeed, our multiple mappings, shifting meanings, institutional pressures and ever-present risks are all parts of the electronic writing classroom. We need, therefore, theories and practices that strive to explore such potentials, to re-write the stories of how computer technologies function, and to position both teachers and students in critical dialogues for change.

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